

## **'Ear and heart with a rapture of dark delight': Music and Wagnerian Motives in the Poetry of A. C. Swinburne**

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The practical and theoretical aesthetics of the late Victorian poet A. C. Swinburne, which is based on an "inner harmony", was announced and demonstrated in his *Poems and Ballads* of 1866, being always associated with a set of musical ideas and analogies. This paper intends to demonstrate, in the following of K. Nijssen, that 'such musical metaphors are not arbitrary, or even uniquely associated to the often purely auditory music of Swinburne's poetry' (2010). The famous aesthetic pronouncement of Walter Pater that "all art permanently aspires to the condition of music" (*The Renaissance*, 1868) seems to apply to this *fin-de-siècle* English poet that in his poem *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), and in a conscious and identifiable way, appropriated a dramatic and musical technique – the *leitmotiv* – derived specifically from the operas of Richard Wagner. Furthermore, his poem *Laus Veneris* (1864) had already precociously treated the transgressive confluence between the sacred and the profane usually present in Wagner. Finally, Swinburne's central section of *A Century of Roundels* (1882-3) contains three formally and thematically interconnected poetic compositions, entitled respectively "The Death of Richard Wagner", "Lohengrin" and "Tristan and Isolde", constituting his most explicit tribute to Wagner and his music.

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Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was one of the most accomplished lyric poets of the Victorian Era and was a pre-eminent symbol of rebellion against the conservative values of his time.<sup>2</sup> According to Jerome MacGann in "Poetry in the Condition of Music" (2009), Swinburne had one word for the meaning and origin of all poems: 'harmony' (619). The word, the idea, he claims, "is the gravitational centre for an aesthetics -- a theory that was also a practice -- that pervades his work" (619); this was announced and demonstrated in *Poems and Ballads*, his controversial collection of 1866.<sup>3</sup> Poetry, Swinburne himself writes in his later critical essay on "Emily Brontë" (1895), has only "one final and irreplaceable requisite": "inner harmony" (260); this 'harmony' is "the purpose and meaning of all poems, whatever moral ideas they may carry along or even profess" (MacGann 620).

This notion appears to be quite simple, but in reality it implies more than the Romantic formalism present in Coleridge's well-known definition of poetry as "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (1817, 45). When Swinburne refers to a poem's harmony, his thinking is always associated to a set of musical ideas and analogies. The significance of that relationship, though somehow familiar, has not yet begun to be thoroughly understood or appreciated, and neither has the specific set of musical materials that support both his critical and poetic practice. Swinburne's critical prose, as MacGann observes, "is nonetheless everywhere inflected with a musical vocabulary when he writes about the theory and practice of verse" (620).

Thomas Connolly, in his *Swinburne's Theory of Poetry* (1964), had already noted that "inner music" is far more significant for Swinburne and far more difficult to define than "outer or external music" (23); while the first type presents itself in effective physical sounds, the second is associated to the more spiritual or emotional qualities of a poem. Connolly adds, significantly, that "there was only one source of 'inner music' for the poet and that was nature", including "the glory of human nature" (24).

The German operatic composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) also distinguished himself as a dramatist and theoretician whose works profoundly influenced modern literature.<sup>4</sup> Wagner's many operas and innovative

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1870s, in particular, Swinburne wrote militantly republican songs in support of the movement for Italian political unity (in the *Risorgimento*), and also became known for his professed Shelleyan atheism.

<sup>3</sup> This work made such a tremendous scandal, not least because of its celebrations of sado-masochism and necrophilia, that its publisher Edward Moxon withdrew it within weeks of publication.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner's principal aesthetic theories appeared in three works: *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849; *Art and Revolution*), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850; *The Artwork of the Future*) and *Oper und Drama* (1852; *Opera and Drama*). In *Art and Revolution*, Wagner maintained that all art is a revelatory expression of communal joy, and asserted that it should be accessible to everyone.

dramatic theories, as well as his powerful personality, have consistently elicited substantial commentary. His work embodies many of his theories, including the use of cyclic structure, *leitmotiv*, and myth. Wagner's conception of Greek tragedy and interpretation of the pessimistic and materialistic philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Ludwig Feuerbach also inform his operas. Like the ancient Greek dramatists, Wagner combined myths, symbols, and various art forms to express human and social aspirations. His primary goals were to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or unity of the arts, through a synthesis of music, poetry and dance, and to portray the ideal human being. We hope to demonstrate that the younger English poet, Swinburne, pursued similar forms and equivalent goals in his transgressive poetic works.

Unfortunately, Wagner is nowadays more associated to his nation's early twentieth-century catastrophic appropriations of his grandiose myths for dismal political purposes.<sup>5</sup> But he had become a crucial figure in nineteenth-century musical and cultural history precisely for exalting in his works that 'glory of human nature' in a unique musical language, one that most effectively presented his philosophies.<sup>6</sup> He demonstrated that music was not restricted to being pure formalism and abstract theoretical exploration but was a living, vibrant force capable of changing men's lives. When his music dramas violated previous musical and moral conventions and appeared to expose or to arouse inner, often repressed, archetypal human emotions, then his art became much more controversial. And, for artists like A. C. Swinburne, much more interesting.

In her work on *Richard Wagner and the English* (1979), Anne Sessa refers to the symbolic importance of the composer for the English Decadents: he "was drafted for the task of overthrowing Victorianism" (87) and its rigid moral and social rules. Wagner's music drama was, on the other hand, appealing to these artists because of its eroticism, fascinating subjects and the passion of the music itself. The work of authors such as Julian Fane, William Morris, A.C. Swinburne and Aubrey Beardsley was thus influenced by Wagner's treatment of the medieval legends.<sup>7</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites (to which Brotherhood Swinburne belonged early in his career) had in their circle the Wagnerian music critic Franz Hueffer, and Swinburne became acquainted with the composer through George Powell, an admirer and translator of Icelandic literature.<sup>8</sup> Sessa also mentions that Wagner's intentions seem parallel to those of these English artists: despise of materialism and technology, return to the medieval sources of myth and symbol, display of socialist leanings, art as personal mysticism, and the acquisition of outsider status (89).

Central to all of Wagner's polemics, as well, is the 'total work of art', the argument for a synthesis of the resources of poetry on one hand, and music on the other. Seeing the first as a semantic and abstract discourse and the latter as intuitive and aesthetic expression, Wagner argued that the music of the future "has a need which only poetry can fulfil" (*Prose Works*, 1893, 12). The symphony, in particular, represents for him that most accomplished state of musical form in which simple melodic lines could be "doubled or quadrupled ... in order to make possible a richer development of harmony" (26). Voices are employed independently through the art of counterpoint only to provide the melody's supporting harmony, manipulated in a free, continuously expressive development. Ideally, there would be an 'unending melody' in which the voice and text are but part of the fabric, united with a magnificent orchestral web which becomes the action at a distinctly musical pace.

This, MacGann states, "is the entire Wagnerian program for an 'endless melody' built up from a complex and modulated development of related motivic elements" (2009, 621). Through such "harmony and harmony-embodiment polyphony, Wagner is arguing that the poet must so treat his language that it aspires to the condition of music" (621). For him, as for Swinburne himself, the poet's use of words enhances not so much their abstract conventional meaning but their elemental sensuous quality: through metre and rhyme, the poet's utterances acquire a sort of magical power, one of evoking and determining feeling. In this process, we can observe "the poet being drawn to the frontiers of his art and brought into direct contact with music" (622); from this can be concluded that "we must say of his poetry that at its best it would in its final consummation become completely music" (622).

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, Adolf Hitler's use of Wagner's works as propaganda for the Nazi movement contributed significantly to the decline of the composer's international reputation. Criticism of this period noticeably reflects commentators' repugnance for Wagner's nationalism and anti-Semitism. While these subjects continue to elicit commentary, most modern literary scholars largely deem the parallels between Wagner and the Nazi movement extra literary and focus instead on the works' dramatic qualities and philosophical sources.

<sup>6</sup> Although the memory of Nazi Wagnerians persists, English Wagnerites in the nineteenth century did not, on the whole, share these attitudes; on the contrary, they earnestly argued for the ennobling, elevating effect of his music. Wagner's influence on English literature is manifest in poems, novels and dramas.

<sup>7</sup> The English Decadent movement coincided with Wagner's period of greatest popularity. For example, two of William Morris's works deal with subject matter that Wagner used also: the long verse narrative *The Earthly Paradise* (1869) and the huge epic poem *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876); nevertheless, Morris preferred pure poetry to opera.

<sup>8</sup> Three poems in *A Century of Roundels* (1883) memorialise Powell, and the composition "Autumn and Winter" links Powell and Wagner (they died within four months of each other). According to Sessa, Swinburne also mentioned Wagner in various letters addressed to Powell (89).

Wagner was attempting nothing less than a total renovation of music through opera; therefore, he contextualises the subject of 'poetic form' in terms of dramatic form: "The only poetic form that would serve is one in which the poet does not merely describe his subject, but presents it in direct living terms -- that is to say, in the form of drama" (*Prose Works*, 13). In this way, the contents or ideas transmitted through poetry's semantic elements could be treated as the elements themselves of a musical composition. Wagner further defended that these dramatic materials should be taken from ancient myth or legends; thus, the stories could concentrate both on simple and elemental structures and on those primal feelings and emotions usually blunted by contemporary daily life (14). As MacGann observes, Wagner underlines the character of his personages and their main passions melodically, "and the melodies appear in the lyrics or in the accompaniment each time that the passions and the sentiments that they express are involved" (622). For this critic, Wagner's complex motivic modulations -- "frequent repetitions of the same melodic phrases, in passages drawn from the same opera" comprise an explanatory mechanism for the work itself (622).

According to K. Nijsen (2010), Tennyson, the Victorian poet laureate, once called Swinburne 'a reed through which all things blow into music' (Sypher 165); more recently, Nijsen adds, he has been described as "a virtuoso of the English metrical keyboard" and an important collection of essays on his work is titled *The Whole Music of Passion* (Rooksby, 1993). This particular essay argues, like Nijsen's, that 'such musical metaphors are not arbitrary, nor solely concerned with the purely aural music of Swinburne's poetry, but that they bear evidence of a larger influence' -- that of Wagnerism (2010). We further argue that this can be detected both in his letters to friends and in the poems *Laus Veneris*, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, and the three roundels composed on the occasion of Wagner's death.

Nijsen argues that while Walter Pater's statement in his *The Renaissance* (1868) that 'all art constantly aspires to the condition of music' (63) may be an over-generalisation, "it certainly holds true for the self-declared magnum opus of Swinburne". In *Tristram of Lyonesse*, an original modern treatment of the Arthurian legend of love and death on the Cornish and Breton coasts, "Swinburne has consciously and identifiably applied a musical technique derived specifically from Wagner's operas" (2010): he used intricately connected leading motives to shape and unify his celebrated poem.<sup>9</sup> Another of its most important features is the implicit pantheistic vision and the fact of being written in an elevated naturalistic manner. Unlike Wagner, though, the emphasis of the work is not on action but on expository metaphysical valuation of event, and pure lyrical expression with a narrative framework.

*Tristram of Lyonesse*, a lyric epic in nine cantos, written in opulent heroic couplets, dealt with themes that preoccupied Swinburne more widely and was published in July 1882, only a few weeks after the first performance in London of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner's 1859 opera on the same subject, famous for its stylistic innovations.<sup>10</sup> In conjunction with certain similarities between the two works, this near-coincidence has given rise to some debate about the possible influence of Wagner's opera on Swinburne's work. Like Wagner, Swinburne was affected by the visionary fatalism derived from the whole body of Arthurian legends, and believed that the Tristram legend and the courtly mythology which inspired it embodied the highest laws which rule men's lives, the greatest of which being Fate. All vital men and women succumb to its power and are tormented by the obstacles to its full consummation until death bestows fulfilment.

[...]

So came their hour on them that were in life  
Tristram and Iseult: so from love and strife  
The stroke of love's own hand felt last and best  
Gave them deliverance to perpetual rest.

[...]

<sup>9</sup> Tristan makes his first medieval appearance in the early twelfth century in Celtic folklore circulating in the north of France, namely Arthurian romancier Chr tien de Troyes. This long, sprawling, and often lyrical work follows Tristan from the traditional legend into the realm of King Arthur where Tristan participates in the Quest for the Holy Grail. In the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Malory shortened this French version into his own take, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, found in his *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485). Malory's Tristan section is the literal centre of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, as well as the longest of the eight books. It displays a very realistic and jaded view of the world of chivalry. It is rife with adultery, characterised most visibly in Sir Tristan and the Belle Isolde. Of all the knights, Tristan most mirrors that of Lancelot: he loves a queen, the wife of another, is considered a knight as strong and able, noted for being one of the greatest of musicians and falconers.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Wagner wrote his opera (published in 1860 and first performed in 1865) based on Gottfried von Strassburg's 1210 unfinished version of the story in rhyming couplets. Tristan, a valiant Cornish knight is bringing Isolde (Yseult), princess of Ireland, over as a bride for his uncle King Mark. Although he is himself in love with her, the two have a blood feud which forces him to conceal his passion and her to attempt to poison herself and him. Her attendant changes the draft for a love potion and the two fall passionately in love. Although Isolde marries the king, she meets in secret with Tristan and during one of those meetings they are surprised. Tristan discovers he has been betrayed by a jealous friend and fights him, being mortally wounded. Although Isolde has been called to heal him, he ends up dying in her arms. Uttering her lament over the body of her lover, she dies of a broken heart. Wagner pared the story down to essentials to concentrate on just three main dramatic situations, one in each act.

(Canto IX)

Nijssen refers that Francis Sypher, for example, was one of the first critics to compare Swinburne's poem with Wagner's libretto, and to conclude that "the textual parallels between Swinburne's and Wagner's versions of the Tristram story show that Swinburne knew Wagner's text, and was significantly influenced by Wagner's conception of the story" (1971, 166). He nevertheless also admitted that the specific influence of Wagner's music might be harder to trace.

Swinburne became definitely interested in Wagner around 1863, when he read Charles Baudelaire's pamphlet entitled "Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris" (published in 1861), an enthusiastic defence of 'Venusburg Music', the most extreme, savage and libidinal of Wagner's output.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Swinburne himself might have witnessed the scandal caused by the opening performance of that opera at the time of his stay in Paris in 1861.<sup>12</sup> Wagner's *Tannhäuser* was based on the dichotomy between flesh (carnal love, represented by the goddess Venus) and spirit (spiritual love, represented by God), and it is a reflection on nineteenth-century's moral and sexual concerns.<sup>13</sup> Decadence itself depended on a self-conscious blurring of moral absolutes and the poet wanted to take this transgression one step further.<sup>14</sup> And indeed *Laus Veneris* (literally, a praise of Venus or love), his dramatic and lyrical poem of 1864, possesses a strangely Wagnerian atmosphere, where the atheist poet dwells on the intimate feelings of the lustful Tannhäuser in more direct language and, in contrast to Wagner's repentant hero, resigns his own to the pleasures of suffering; his Tannhäuser is willing to accept God's damnation as the price of sexual fulfilment.

[...]

Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair.  
But lo her wonderfully woven hair!  
And thou didst heal us with thy piteous kiss;  
But see now, Lord; *her mouth is lovelier.*

[...]

Behold, my Venus, my soul's body, lies  
With my love laid upon her garment-wise,  
Feeling my love in all her limbs and hair  
And shed between her eyelids through her eyes.

[...]

Their blood runs round the roots of time like rain;  
She casts them forth and gathers them again;  
With nerve and bone *she weaves and multiplies*  
*Exceeding pleasure out of extreme pain.*

[...]

Her beds are full of perfume and sad sound,  
Her doors are made with music, and barred round  
With sighing and with laughter and with tears,  
With tears whereby strong souls of men are bound.

[...]

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<sup>11</sup> Baudelaire viewed this as a work of archetypal imaginative importance, given the poet's understanding of the erratic intensity of male sexuality and his belief that antithetical impulses towards salvation and damnation were integral to the human psyche.

<sup>12</sup> A demonstration broke out against Wagner's patron, the unpopular wife of the Austrian ambassador, leading the composer to withdraw the score. *Tannhäuser* had to wait until 1876 for its London premiere, though the Dresden version of the Overture was already a familiar concert item.

<sup>13</sup> In the legend, the young knight Tannhäuser falls in love with Venus and lives with her in her subterranean home until he becomes filled with remorse. He escapes her snares and travels to Rome to ask Pope Urban if he could be absolved of his sins. The Pope declares it impossible, just as impossible as his papal staff blossoming. Three days after Tannhäuser returns to Vienna, the Pope's staff supposedly bloomed with flowers, but the knight never learns of this divine miracle and spends his life in damnation. Wagner prepared two versions of his score of *Tannhäuser*, and in both the lofty moral implications of the redemption of the hero's soul are balanced by one of the most extreme depictions of sex attempted in music, both bringing the sacred and the profane into disturbing proximity.

<sup>14</sup> It is significant, in this context, that Oscar Wilde's hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1) also becomes obsessively drawn to Wagner's opera, in a passage widely viewed as a catalogue of the trappings of decadence.

Me, most forsaken of all souls that fell;  
Me, *satiated with things insatiable*;  
Me, for whose sake the extreme hell makes mirth,  
Yea, laughter kindles at the heart of hell.

[...] (Stanzas 5, 8, 29, 32 and 35, my emphasis)

Swinburne's poem contains rich descriptions of atmosphere as well as the inner workings of the speaker's mind. The poet presents this paradox of fulfilment and loss through the paired images of Heaven and Hell, desire and death. He maintains a strict rhyming structure throughout the poem and the sonorities of its music enhance the richness of its language. MacGann mentions, in his article, that Swinburne possessed and cherished a copy of Wagner's *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra* (1861), with its important introductory essay entitled "Lettre sur la Musique", presenting the composer's central ideas on the relation of music to poetry (623). This introduction would be extremely influential for both poets, Baudelaire and Swinburne, being a defense of the so-called 'poetic theatre' defended by Wagner in his work entitled *Oper und Drama* (1852).

Nijsen argues that while it may be difficult to relate *Tristram of Lyonesse* to *Tristan und Isolde* in specific, there are very strong indications that Swinburne was influenced by Wagner's general approach to his musical dramas when he wrote his poem. The critic Elliott Zuckerman, Nijsen refers, observed that the two were often criticised for the same reasons: "Swinburne's verbal excesses were like Wagner's musical excesses" (62). Thus, while working on his poem, Swinburne himself has written that "the thought of Wagner's music ought to abash but does stimulate me" (*Letters*, 41). And, in fact, in his hands the form of the heroic couplet grew from antithetical and sharp caesura to a rich melodious measure, capable of an infinite variety of notes and harmonies. This effect is especially present in one of Tristram's most dramatic speeches:

[...]  
We have loved and slain each other, and love yet.  
Slain; for we live not surely, being in twain:  
In her I lived, and in me she is slain,  
Who loved me that I brought her to her doom,  
Who loved her that her love might be my tomb.  
[...]  
(Canto IX)

More specifically, critics have noted on the use of *leitmotiv* techniques. Nijsen mentions that according to John Reed, "there is no doubt that Swinburne did employ, in 'Tristram of Lyonesse', the technique of a conscious and disciplined motif suggestive of musical composition" (1966: 100); and it is here, he argues, that Wagner's influence is felt most strongly. Similarly, as Nijsen has remarked, Catherine Maxwell notes that "the intricately scored arrangement of Swinburne's composition, with its artful internal echoes and variations, its lyrical finesse and swelling symphonic grandeur, irresistibly suggests musical analogies" (2006: 107).

Nijsen uses Stanley Sadie's definitions to explain a musical *leitmotiv*, central to Wagner's compositional method: "it may be described as a theme, clearly defined so as to retain its identity if modified on subsequent appearances, whose purpose is to symbolise or represent a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force, or any other ingredient in a dramatic work" (2010). In other words, for a musical theme to be identified as a *leitmotiv*, it must be (1) so clearly defined that its recurrences can be recognized as variations, and (2) connected to a specific story-element. In his *Wagner and Literature* (1982), Richard Furness describes how this *leitmotiv* technique has been transferred to literature, as *leitmotifs* are often used to unite and give direction to passages that would otherwise become too fragmented.

But, as Nijsen notes, Furness also provides a more elaborate definition of a literary *leitmotiv*: "either a repeated group of words or a mere verbal formula that must make an emotional impact" (37); and here it is Wagner's example that is of importance, for his continual transformation of existing motifs into new ones, conveying a sense of progressive emotional and psychological development, "immeasurably enriched the potential of language" (37). For Nijsen, this description adds an important third characteristic to the definition cited above: it must also portray a sense of emotional or psychological development in the character or theme which it represents.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> As static and stereotypical as the *leitmotiv* may seem as a means of external characterisation, the Wagnerian interweaving of references allows a more dynamic experience of time by continually referring to and incorporating elements of the future and the past, pointing beyond the figures' present consciousness.

As Nijsen has shown, Swinburne uses *leitmotifs* at several points in *Tristram of Lyonesse*. The first of these occurs at the very end of the first canto. It represents the poem's central theme: the love between Tristram and Iseult of Ireland; the relevant sequence of words appears just after the two have drunken the love potion: *And their four lips became one burning mouth*. [38]. Besides its placement at the end of a chapter and a central point in the story, also the particularly musical way in which Swinburne has phrased these lines contributes to the emphasis placed on the final line. This, as Nijsen notes, is achieved especially through the interplay between stress and alliteration. The phrase discussed above re-appears at the very end of the poem, in canto IX: 'The Sailing of the Swan'. After all their joys and sorrows in England and abroad, Tristram has finally died and Iseult of Ireland has just come upon his death-bed, when Swinburne writes: *And their four lips became one silent mouth* [148]. This *leitmotiv* occurs at their two most important scenes together and, for Nijsen, symbolizes "their development from, put simply, being alive to being dead". In both cases the lovers are unified by a kiss. Nijsen argues that Swinburne uses the phrase to achieve exactly what, according to Raymond Furness, a *leitmotiv's* main function is: "[to intensify] the quality of feeling by repetition, unifying the various parts of the composition and relating the various parts to the whole" (7).

The central section of *A Century of Roundels*, another work that Swinburne published at this time (1883), contains three short poems which are mutually related or connected and that probably constitute the most explicit poetic tribute to Wagner and his music. These are three roundels, respectively and significantly entitled "The Death of Richard Wagner", "Lohengrin" e "Tristan and Isolde". The form of the roundel, popular during the medieval and renaissance periods, was creatively adapted and developed by Swinburne, who was a devoted experimenter. The form consists of an eleven-line composition, divided in three stanzas and containing an enjambed refrain, which is repeated twice from the initial verse. The poet himself has described and illustrated this form in his poem *The Roundel*, which suggests not only the typical circularity of the form but also its spontaneous, light and melodic qualities:

A Roundel is wrought as a ring or a starbright sphere,  
 With craft of delight and with cunning of sound unsought,  
 That the heart of the hearer may smile it to pleasure his ear  
 A roundel is wrought.  
 (Stanza 1, my emphasis)

The *simile* which is established with a jewel evokes not only its precious quality but also the pleasurable effects its aesthetic elaborateness arouses, in this case the auditory sensations of the listener. This poem might also stand as a paradigmatic illustration of Swinburne's 'art for art's sake' maxim and his belief in the musical power of poetry.

In the elegiac roundel entitled "The Death of Richard Wagner", from which the quotation ('ear and heart with a rapture of dark delight') in my paper's title is taken, the poet uses this particularly musical poetic form as the most fit medium to express not only his admiration for the composer but especially to describe and summarise the powerful effects that Wagner's music had on his mind and spirit. Swinburne associates the elemental natural elements (earth, sea, winds, thunders, etc.) to the composer's spirit, suggesting that his music had the power to summon nature itself, giving it a voice of its own:

Winds that make moan and triumph, skies that bend,  
 Thunders, and sound of tides in gulf and firth,  
*Spake through his spirit of speech*, whose death should send  
 Mourning on earth.  
 [...]  
 Speech as of powers whose uttered word laid bare  
 The world's great heart.  
 [...]  
 The spell of the mage of music evoked their sense, as an unknown light  
 From the depths of the sea.  
 [...]  
 Eye might not endure it, but *hear and heart with a rapture of dark delight*,  
 With a terror and wonder, whose core was joy, and a passion of thought set free,  
 [...]  
 (Stanzas 3, 6, 7 and 9, my emphasis)

The other two much shorter dedicatory roundels (containing three triplets each) evoke two major works, and respective philosophical concepts, by Wagner and are significantly called 'Preludes'. The first one, "Lohengrin", like its Wagnerian original, exalts the power of Love as also an elemental force that comes "out of the depths [and heights] of things" to change Man's heart and soul" (stanza 1).<sup>16</sup> The second roundel, "Tristan and Isolde", reflects on the power of Fate to intervene in Man's plans and to give human existence its intrinsic instability: "laden with fears in wait, / [...] / Till the soul see, all too late" (stanza 2). Another roundel in the collection, entitled "Dead Love", recalling the fateful story of those two lovers, seems to unite the themes of love and fate, so much present in both Wagner and Swinburne's works:

Dead love, by treason slain, lies stark,  
 White as a dead stark-stricken dove:  
 None that pass by him pause to mark  
     Dead love.  
 (Stanza 1)

Regarding Swinburne's transgressive technique of dissolving the boundaries of language by coalescing distinctions of sound and meaning, Isobel Armstrong – thinking of the repeated image of transcendence in the poet's work – has famously remarked that the poet's

[...] synonym chain produces an endless chain of substitution in which doubled words and phrases blur and exchange *semantic and aural attributes* with libidinal energy, impelled by an *insistent and self-perpetuating metrical form* which has the physical shock-effect of the regular waves of the sea, [...] (1993: 405, my emphasis)

The sea is, in fact, Swinburne's most recurring figure for pure rhythm: a perpetual motion rising and falling, falling and rising – a rhythm which Swinburne increasingly turns into an abstract metrical principle. On the other hand, Yopie Prins's study on "Swinburne's Sapphic Sublime" (1999), which explains why he has been considered the most Sapphic of Victorian poets, states that "What is 'impulsive', 'uncontrollable' and infinitely 'musical' in Swinburne is his unsurpassed metrical virtuosity, the passionate rhythms that rule his verse" (113). In his most famous and scandalous poem, "Anactoria" (1866), Swinburne turns Sappho's lyricism into a lurid meditation on the pleasures of rhythm. Prins suggests that the Sapphic body emerges in Swinburne's poetry as a rhythmicized, eroticized form, an embodiment of the rhythm of Eros itself, in which the body of the poet is sacrificed to the body of the song (1999: 130). She argues, therefore, that all of Swinburne's poetic *corpus* or work is also constituted on this model.

In "Rapture and the Flesh" (2009), Jason Rudy also states that Swinburne's idea of poetry relies on its kinship with the human body and on the play with the physiological potential of rhythm. The best poetry for Swinburne seems to be that which offers readers a physical experience, "a journey into palpitating life and the interconnectedness of things" (2009: 140). For Rudy, Swinburne builds his 'harmony' less on language and the ideas inherent in words than on "the scaffolding of poetic form and the physiological experience of rhythm and sound" (150). The symbiosis between the individual and the natural world, present namely in his poem "The Lake of Gaube", becomes a 'oneness', which the poet emphasises through his near-maniac use of alliteration, insistent percussive sounds that, in Rudy's words, "create for the reader a sonic web of experience" (151). "By the North Sea" is the poem which perhaps best exemplifies this metrical and 'antiphonal' effect due to its echoing sounds and rhythms, both within and among stanzas, emphasizing the bleakness of the scene. The resonances of the passage act the greater resonance that Swinburne attributes to the natural world: "To the soul in my soul that rejoices / For the song that is over my song" (stanza 6).

Wagner's belief that music could bind all life, art, reality and illusion together into one symbiotic union that would then work its own unique magic upon the audience seems to correspond exactly to the poet's concept of his own art. But, like Wagner's music, his verse was seen in his time not only as decadent but as immoral and harmful to the senses – "a purveyor of sadistic delights", containing a dangerous "fusion of eroticism and extinction" and possessing a "nervous exhaustion and shimmering morbidity" (Furness, 2002: 32). As Jonathan Bate has written in the *TLS*, Swinburne's "verse is just about the only place in buttoned-up English culture where we find a mood and a style genuinely akin to that of the Wagnerian *Liebestod*" (2009: 7) – in Thomas Mann's words, "a world in love with both death and beauty" (1933: 242). Baudelaire's famous pronouncement on

<sup>16</sup> Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* (1850), one of the most Romantic of his works, portrays the saga of a mysterious lover whose identity must be hidden from the beloved.

Wagner's music could apply as well to Swinburne's poetry: "an infinite, tempestuous art, submerging and ecstatic" (1861: 16), and serve as a fit conclusion to this article.

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